

Pray More Advent Retreat - Transcript

What the 'Our Father' Teaches us about Prayer

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Hello. My name is Stephen Beale. I'm a columnist at CatholicExchange.com, and I'm also in the process of completing my Master's degree in theology at Providence College. Today, I'm pleased to be sharing with you my reflections on prayer based on my study of the Our Father. And so before we get into our lecture, why don't we actually begin by praying?

And what better prayer to begin with than Our Father itself? So let us pray. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who've trespassed against us. Lead us not to trial, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever. Amen. In the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Okay. Today we'll be talking about what the Our Father teaches us about prayer. My remarks are divided into 3 main parts. First, in a brief section we will discuss the importance of prayer itself. Second, we will briefly address why the Our Father is a good way to learn about prayer. And then third, in the main section of the lecture, we'll identify 6 specific lessons for prayer that we can derive from the Our Father. So first, I'd like to just briefly state the obvious, but I think it's worth exploring, and that is that the prayer is of crucial importance in the life of a Christian. And certainly there are many reasons we could list on why this is the case, but there are 2 that really stand out, and I want to highlight these before we get into our main discussion.

First, prayer is a vital source, you can say an essential channel, of grace. In his classic work, *The Introduction to the Devout Life*, St. Francis de Sales uses the analogy of Jacob's ladder from Genesis to describe the 2 primary ways we access God's grace. He urges to think of these 2 ways as the 2 sides of that ladder. One side represents prayer, by which we ascend in the spirit to heaven to beseech God for grace. And the other side symbolizes the sacraments, by which God descends from heaven to bestow his grace upon us. But second, I think we can go even further than this and say that prayer unites us with Christ. And I think this really

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builds upon the analogy we just discussed. And of course, in the sacramental context, we are certainly united to Christ. Baptism unites us to his death, and the Eucharist, we are united to him even more profoundly, because he is truly and fully present to us in the Eucharist. But in prayer, we are also united with Christ, and this will become clear in our next section.

But briefly, I just want to cite one passage in the gospels that really points to this truth, and that's in John 15, where Jesus repeatedly urges his disciples to remain in him. In John 15:7, Jesus hints at one way we ought to remain in Him, and that is to have His words remain in us. So, praying through the gospels, and especially by praying the Our Father, certainly one way we can remain in Him – And again, we'll be getting into this in more detail in our final section. But before we get to the lessons from the Our Father, I also want to just briefly make a few points about why the Our Father itself is so important, and why it works, why it's a good place to study prayer in general. First, it's the most original and most fundamental Christian prayer. And second, just because it's a prayer that comes from Jesus Himself. In fact, when He provided the text of this prayer to His followers, He introduced it by saying that this was the way they were to pray. So we do well to consider this as a model for all Christian prayer.

Now, we can get to the 6 major lessons about prayer that I believe we can learn from the Our Father. First, we should prepare to pray. I think all too often we leap into prayer and kind of sleepwalk through the words. And I think one reason for this, other than it being a consequence of the digitally distracted society we live in, is a lack of preparation. And this goes not just for longer prayers, but for short ones too. Perhaps especially for short ones. In a spiritual classic, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, which I mentioned earlier, St. Francis de Sales has a series of meditations early in the text. And in front of each meditation he has this very simple directive: Place yourself in the presence of God. The Our Father reminds us of the importance of this. In fact, in the Greek and Latin text of this prayer, the word for "Father" actually comes before the word "Our". So God hits this right away. So I think it's important to put ourselves in the right referential frame of mind. In his commentary on the Our Father, St. Thomas Aquinas says the first clause of the prayer, "Who art in heaven", offers us additional clues on how to do this. Aquinas says our preparation quite simply should consist of the contemplation of heavenly things.

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One effective way I believe we can do this is to recall some of the great encounters with God recorded in the Old Testament, where the majesty, grandeur, and awesome power of God are glimpsed. In particular, I have 4 passages in mind, and I think in recalling these we can put ourselves in the presence of God. So the first example is the Cloud of Fire at Sinai, and you can find that in Exodus 24. The second is God and the storm cloud, which is in Job 38. Third is the vision of Ezekiel, Ezekiel 1. Fourth is the vision of Daniel in Daniel 7. Now, in addition to preparing by putting ourselves in the presence of God, there's also an outline of moral preparation according to St. Gregory of Nyssa, one of the great church Fathers. Like Aquinas, Gregory of Nyssa sees in the opening phrases guidance on how we should prepare. Now, he seizes upon the phrase "Hallowed be thy name", and he says that we are so to speak on hallowed spiritual ground, just as Moses was when he encountered God in the burning bush and had to take off his sandals. And by the way, recall this is where God revealed his divine name. "I am who I am."

Just as Moses shook off his sandals, so also we should shake off the trappings of this world. Make sure you are free from distraction, whatever normally would tug at your attention. Like your phone or a background television, make sure all of these things are turned off. And importantly, this preparation should include a moral element, lest we, to use Gregory's of Nyssa's words, pollute with our defiled lips and incorruptible name.

So the first lesson is, again, prepare yourself for prayer, and do this by putting yourself in the presence of God. And also through moral preparation. The second lesson is that in prayer, we pray with and through Christ. Often, prayer is thought of as a sort of message in a bottle sent to God, or some kind of mystic lifeline to heaven. From this perspective, prayer is something that we initiate. Now, that's all true, but it's not the whole story of what happens in prayer. Prayer is indeed something we initiate, but it is God who first moves us to even pray to Him. It is God who spoke to us first. In the Our Father, He has given us all the words we need in order to speak to Him, to praise and glorify Him, and also to communicate with Him about our wants, our longings, our struggles, our mundane wants and needs, our daily bread, so to speak, to our debts of sin, to our need for deliverance for whatever evil ails us. Remember, of course, that the Our Father consists of words given to us by the divine word incarnate himself. Now, think about that for a moment, how awesome that is. So prayer is not just something we say to God in heaven, to the all-powerful omnipresent God. As awesome alone as that would be.

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No, prayer is something we do with God. So, prayer thus is not so much something we say to God as a dialog into which we enter.

The Old Testament actually gives us a great metaphor for what is really happening in prayer. Now, in the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for meditation, which is a form of prayer, is the word “Hagah”. This word is also used elsewhere with other meanings, and one of those other places is in Isaiah 31:4, and I’m going to read that to you now. “For thus says the Lord to me: Just as the lion roars”, and the word there is “Hagah”, “and the lion’s whelp upon his prey, and when a multitude of shepherds shall come against him, he will not fear at their voice, nor be afraid of their multitude. So shall the Lord of hosts come down to fight upon Zion and upon the hill thereof.” So there, in that passage, God is compared to a roaring lion, describing how He will wage war. And the word for “war” here is the same as the word for “meditate”. In his encyclical, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, Pope John Paul II called for us to recover our sense of amazement at Christ’s real presence in the Eucharist. And I think we really need to do the same thing with prayer, recover the sense of wonder and amazement that we really do talk with and to a living God who truly hears us.

The third lesson from the Our Father is that it helps us to order our desires. In his commentary on the Our Father, Aquinas says that the prayer teaches us to order our desires as they should be ordered. So notice that before we get to any petitions concerning our own needs and wants, we pray to God’s name that it may be hallowed, that His kingdom come, and that His will be done, and so we should desire these things first. As Jesus Himself said in Matthew 6:31-34, He said “Do not worry and say ‘what are we to eat?’, or ‘what are we to drink?’, or ‘what are we to wear?’ All these things the pagans seek. Your Heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all of these things will be given you besides. Do not worry about tomorrow. Tomorrow will take care of itself. Sufficient for a day is its own evil.” Likewise, Psalm 27:4 states “One thing have I desired of the Lord. That I will seek after, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life to behold the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple.” So again, desire first to praise God, belong to His kingdom, and live according to His will.

And in fact we can expand this list of things for which we are to desire first. According to Aquinas, the prayer also becomes an expression of our longing for heaven. This part of the prayer, according to Aquinas, “That is in heaven”, is

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appropriate and fitting also, if “In heaven” is taken to mean that spiritual and eternal good, in which true happiness consists, because of it, our desires are lifted up towards heavenly things. So our desires ought to tend towards where we have our Father, because there is our true home. Moreover, from it, we are told that if our life is to be in heaven, then we ought to be conformed to our Heavenly Father. From all of this, the words “in heaven” are most appropriate in prayer in that they signify both a heavenly desire and a heavenly life. Now, of course, if we read the prayer in this way, then the first 2 words also indicate what we should be longing for, namely, first, we should be longing for the Father; that is God himself. And second, after the Father, we should be longing for the Family of God, the community of Christians. That is the church, which is signified of course in the word “Our”.

The fourth lesson concerns our needs and wants. And St. Augustine lays down this very important principle in one of his letters. He says that whatever we may need or want shall find expression in the Our Father. So, for example, take the petition for daily bread. Augustine says that this phrase can be a stand-in for whatever our temporal material needs will be today. So that includes our need for food, a stable income, housing, or any other legitimate temporal need. Another example is the petition for deliverance from evil. According to Augustine, “This petition, which stands last in the Lord’s prayer, is so comprehensive that a Christian, in whatsoever affliction he may be placed, may in using give utterance to his groans and find vent for his tears.” And this point leads to an additional lesson on prayer. That’s what I call “attitude over words”.

The actual words we use are less important than our attitude. In other words, what really matters is the act of prayer itself. The fact that we’re putting ourselves before God, pouring our hearts before Him, and opening our minds to the contemplation of His truth, goodness, and beauty is what matters. As Augustine puts it, “To use much speaking in prayer is to employ a superfluity of words in asking a necessary thing; But to prolong prayer is to have the heart throbbing with continued pious emotion towards Him to whom we pray. For most cases prayer consists more in groaning than in speaking, in tears rather than in words. But He sets our tears in His sight, and our groaning is not hidden from Him, who made all things by the Word, and does not need human words.” So we don’t even need words for prayer. God will supply them for us. And I think this is really one of the supreme lessons that we’re to get from the Our Father.

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The 6th and final lesson is very brief, but important as well. That concerns the social nature of prayer. Now, notice how there is no sense of the isolated individual in prayer. Although prayer can and certainly sometimes should be private, there is always a social dimension to it. Even when we are alone, we still say “Our Father”. We are still conscious of the broader community of Christians, and in a sense we are connected with them as we say this prayer. And so I would say that even when we’re not saying the Our Father, we should be conscious of the fact that we are not relating to God solely as individuals, but that we approach Him through a community, which is the church.

Well, I thank you for joining me today in this reflection on the Our Father. I hope you found it edifying, and I hope you will keep some of these lessons and reflections in mind the next time you say the Our Father. So thanks again, have a good day, and God bless.